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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7306

RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 5914

INFO RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0873

RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0827

RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME PRIORITY 1017

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000097

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [EAGR](#) [FAID](#) [ECON](#) [FAS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [SY](#) [WFP](#)

SUBJECT: SARG SHEDS LIGHT ON ITS DROUGHT CONCERNs

REF: A. DAMASCUS 070

[1](#)B. 09 DAMASCUS 619

[1](#)C. 09 DAMASCUS 432

[1](#)D. 09 DAMASCUS 499

[1](#)E. 08 DAMASCUS 847

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Chuck Hunter for reasons 1.4(b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: SARG officials discussed the drought afflicting northeast Syria with surprising transparency during a January 27 public forum that drew comparisons to those held during the pre-2001 "Damascus Spring." During the same week, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Abdullah al-Dardari publicly blamed the drought for Syria's failure to achieve a series of economic goals in the past few years. Though recent rains raised hopes of possible relief on the horizon, representatives from the World Food Program (WFP) and Action Against Hunger-Spain underscored the worsening humanitarian impact of the drought during meetings with Emboffs. The WFP effort has reached "a critical point," and WFP officials believe that a U.S. contribution could spark a "domino effect" of donations that will not otherwise be forthcoming. END SUMMARY.

SARG INCREASINGLY FRANK ABOUT DROUGHT SEVERITY

[1](#)2. (C) SARG officials discussed the drought afflicting northeast Syria with surprising transparency during a January 27 public forum organized by the Syrian Economic Society. Some press commentators compared the event to those held during the "Damascus Spring," a movement that attempted to revive civil society but was eventually crushed by the SARG in 2001. Government participants at the forum acknowledged that poverty levels in the northeast governorates now hover around 80 percent, and the water shortage approaches 2.5 billion cubic meters per year. Hassan Katana, Head of Statistics and Planning at the Ministry of Agriculture, told attendees, "All our agricultural resources have been used up.

The real challenge is to develop strategies and know-how to provide new economic activity in this region." Atieh al-Hindi, Head of the National Agricultural Policy Center, acknowledged the government's responsibility for environmental challenges, remarking that its subsidy policies helped to improve living standards in the northeast but contributed to the region's water shortage.

[1](#)3. (SBU) During the same week, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Abdullah al-Dardari arguably went further, blaming the drought wholesale for recent economic shortcomings. Speaking to the First Conference on International Development in Syria on January 23, Dardari

lamented that "Syria could have achieved goals pertaining to unemployment, poverty, and growth if it was not for the drought that hit the country."

"FROM BAD TO WORSE"

¶4. (C) World Food Program (WFP) Country Representative Muhannad Hadi and Action Against Hunger-Spain (ACF) Head of Mission Lucia Oliveira underscored the continuing impact of the drought in the northeast during recent meetings with Embooffs. Having just returned from a three-day visit to the region, Hadi described the humanitarian situation in the drought-stricken governorates as "going from bad to worse." He said the trip reinforced his conviction that migrants are coming back to the region (ref A), drawn by encouraging rainfall over recent months. While Hadi confirmed that fields are noticeably greener in the areas he visited, he acknowledged starkly that WFP "can't meet the needs of those returning," given the organization's struggle even to attract sufficient funds to feed its target population of 300,000 individuals.

¶5. (C) WFP Deputy Country Director Silvana Giuffrida expressed cautious optimism about a strong wheat harvest this year, but emphasized both the continued immediate need to feed the affected population through the summer harvest season and the longer-term need for assistance in overcoming four years of catastrophic drought. In a vignette demonstrating the serious economic and social consequences of

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the crisis, Giuffrida recounted a conversation she had with a mother who married off two of her daughters early because she could no longer afford to feed them. Her son had also departed six months earlier with other migrants from the village to find work in Lebanon and has not been seen or heard from since. "When I asked how old he was, I expected her to say 15 or 16," Giuffrida said. "But he was only nine years old."

¶6. (C) Oliveira, who lives and works in Hassakeh, drew a similar picture as Hadi and Giuffrida during a January 27 meeting. Oliveira said that pastures and farmland are "sprouting" after much-needed rain, but tremendous humanitarian needs continue to persist in the region. She added that malnutrition rates among Iraqi refugees in northeast Syria (the population targeted by ACF's projects in the area) are not especially high but that ACF's assessments have identified higher levels of low-calorie consumption and anemia. Oliveira judges that these problems are mirrored among the regional Syrian population, and usually in greater severity.

HOPING FOR A U.S.-LED DOMINO EFFECT

¶7. (C) Hadi confessed to growing frustration with the funding of the current WFP appeal. The \$22.3 million Emergency Response launched in November has thus far received only \$5.3 million from donors, though Hadi announced that a further \$2 million from European Commission Humanitarian Aid (ECHO) appears to be imminent. (NOTE: Contacts from the EU Delegation in Damascus confirmed Hadi's statement, but noted that the donation has not been finalized yet. END NOTE.) When asked when WFP might be forced to decide between cutting the target number of beneficiaries or cutting food rations, Hadi responded "right now." WFP currently has sufficient funds to cover 240,000 beneficiaries for food distribution scheduled to begin in February, 60,000 fewer than intended. For the second food distribution in March/April, the shortfall is even larger: even with the expected funds from ECHO, WFP would only have enough resources to feed 150,000 individuals.

¶ 8. (C) In light of the funding shortfall, Hadi declared that "we are at a critical point." Citing the opinion of WFP officials in Rome, he asserted that no further donations would likely be forthcoming unless the United States steps forward with a contribution which could spark a "domino effect." Giuffrida added that even a "symbolic" U.S. donation could not only inject new life into the WFP appeal, but also -- based on her frequent interactions with SARG officials -- could "go a long way" politically for U.S.-Syria relations. Both officials emphasized more than once that they would welcome the opportunity to bring a U.S. embassy representative on a future trip to the region to witness the humanitarian situation first hand.

¶ 9. (C) Hadi (please protect) revealed that the rebranding of the current WFP appeal as an "emergency" -- previously a redline term for the SARG -- had much to do with the United States. He explained that over a period of several months last year, his conversations with SARG officials revealed lessening suspicion of U.S. motives under the Obama administration. Hadi believes this more relaxed outlook permitted the SARG to lower its ideological guard and be more frank about the severity of the situation in the drought-affected areas.

¶ 10. (C) COMMENT: The statements by Dardari and SARG participants at the public forum days later demonstrated a newfound willingness to discuss more openly the economic and social challenges posed by the drought; however, publicly acknowledging the scale of migration from the northeast is still considered taboo. Moreover, Dardari's comments are also likely an effort to deflect dissatisfaction with the country's economic performance away from himself, the focal point of much public ire.

¶ 11. (C) COMMENT, cont: Giuffrida's allusion to a "symbolic" donation implies that WFP may anticipate that any U.S. contribution would be well below the \$10 million requested last month. Nonetheless, her contention that a U.S. donation would go "a long way politically" probably overstates the

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significance the SARG would attach to such a gesture, though it could serve as a potential confidence-building step in U.S.-SARG engagement. END COMMENT.

HUNTER